

Chapter 1

Why Improve?

Now more than ever, healthcare in the United States is challenged. Working hard and doing good work no longer ensure success. The demands placed on providers leave little time for anything that is not urgent. Finances are tight and patients expect more. Despite these challenges, innovative providers have found that, over time, consistent, practical improvements can have a major impact on operational, satisfaction, and financial outcomes. Because clinical operations are the productive engine of healthcare, a commitment to improvement can significantly affect results.

Many providers feel overwhelmed just keeping up with each day's workload. However, reacting only to today's urgent demands without addressing the important issues that shape the workload can lead to chronic frustration and even burnout. As one physician commented, "When I look at the meeting minutes, they never change from year to year. We're always dealing with the same unsolved problems." Overbooked schedules and ringing phones demand a response now. Only by stepping back to look at how resources are being used, why processes are done a certain way, as well as what a group's underlying values are, can sustainable solutions be found. (See Table 1.1)

Table 1.1 Urgent Versus Important

Urgent	versus	Important
Fit more appointments into today's overbooked schedule		Identify new ways to use clinical resources to improve patient access
Answer ringing phones now		Assess how providers and staff impact phone call volume
See patient with diabetes		Measure and improve clinical outcomes for patients with diabetes
Process today's batch of prescription refills		Examine how to streamline the refill process

Although the reported percentage of overall patient satisfaction is high, Consumer Reports researchers found that 15% of patients complained of rushed visits with their providers, and more endured long waiting periods before being seen. From the provider's perspective, physicians in one survey described the "best" patient as one who understands the doctor's time, seems to understand what the doctor says, and is compliant (Consumer Reports, 1999, February).

Some groups start with big improvements, committing early to significant changes. More often, improvement starts with small process changes that demonstrate results and build momentum for larger efforts. After sifting through 1,435 companies to see how the top 11 transitioned from good to great, author Jim Collins describes the central role of ongoing improvement in their success:

The good-to-great companies understood a simple truth: Tremendous power exists in the fact of continued improvement and the delivery of results. Point to tangible accomplishments—however incremental at first—and show how these steps fit into the context of an overall concept that will work. When you do this in such a way that people see and feel the buildup of momentum, they will line up with enthusiasm (Collins, J., 2001).

Collins found that over time, the common denominator for the organizations which went from good to great was not strict financial controls or the latest technology, but a consistent effort to improve. For some groups, the initial impetus can be a major bump in

the road. As described Case Study #2, Bellin Health System had acquired 20 sites with little in common:

The physicians were frustrated. They thought they had joined a system and what they had expected was not occurring. It was a chaotic group that was losing money. A decision was made as an organization to bail out of the primary care network or to make it work.

For those who stay the course, the rewards of improvement can be substantial. Most patients at Bellin are now offered an appointment on the day that they call, patient satisfaction has improved for five straight quarters, and 77 % of Bellin’s clinics have improved operating margins between 5% and 50 %. CareSouth Carolina, Inc. (see also Case Study #5) has reduced average HbA1c in patients with diabetes by more than 30%.

Sustainable improvement energizes physicians, managers, and staff, freeing up a greater sense of possibility in their daily work as opposed to focusing on problems. In fact, when people focus primarily on fixing problems, they become depressed. When they identify the type of future they’d like to create, however, they become energized (Lippitt, R., Watson, J., & Westly, B., 1958). The reader will find practical tools for moving beyond a current state that’s filled with inefficiency and waits toward the goals of immediate access to healing and enabling relationships from a system that’s constantly removing waste. (See Table 1.2.)

Table 1.2 Current State Versus Perfect State

Current State	versus	Perfect State
Transaction		Healing relationships
Waits		Immediate access
Compliant patients		Enabled patients
Inefficiencies		Constantly removes waste

Healthcare has never been in greater need of souls committed to creating possibility in the face of today’s challenges. Start somewhere. Begin to show results and have fun. Join like-minded others to build a critical mass of possibility.

